

Chapter One

November, 1278

The airship swayed with the fury of the storm.

Beric Cohmwell commanded the bridge of the *Ula*, overseeing the crew as they worked around him.

Outside, the storm raged on, savage and unrelenting in its ferocity. The wind howled like a banshee as it pounded against the hull, sending ripples of unease through Beric's gut. He had never cared for flight. The very concept of drifting thousands of feet over the earth terrified him in truth. *Men were never meant to reach so high*, he thought, *or else the Mother would have given them wings*.

His father had never understood his son's fear of flight. Then again, the old king had never been afraid of anything. He was King William the Strong. King William the Brave. King William the Conqueror. And William did not abide weakness in others. Not in any form. Beric wondered if his father had even been capable of understanding it.

"A king must be fearless," he remembered his father telling him once. "You are not some frightened child, you are my son, and Nin's future king. You are a Cohmwell. You must remember that always. You must show strength, no matter whom you are facing. It is the only thing the world knows, all it has ever known. Do you understand me?" The last question he'd asked had carried with it a threat. Don't answer incorrectly, or you will regret it."

"Yes, papa". He still remembered the look on his father's face from that day, all those years ago. The old king hadn't believed him. William had always seen his son as weak. No matter what Beric had done, nothing had been good enough for that man. What a bitter disappointment he must have been.

"You must never hesitate-not before beasts, men, nor even the *Mother* herself." The words of his father echoed in his mind, playing again and again against the cries of the unrelenting elements outside. Beric thought it peculiar he should think of William now. He was nearly six-years dead, but his ghost still lingered. Haunting him, taunting him, remaining with his every waking moment.

Admin 2016-1-15 9:40 AM

Comment [3]: A note about these dates – my default as a reader because of the month November on our calendar, is to think of this as 1278AD.

If you don't want this effect then I'd suggest an alternate form of dating these. Perhaps you could date the season vs. the month. You could also consider context for the date, i.e. 1278 of the New Age

Admin 2016-1-15 9:40 AM

Comment [4]: This line repeats the opening paragraph line. I'm wondering if you might make this your opening line simply by reversing this and the previous sentence, then cutting the above paragraph. This sentence is stronger and more of a hook.

You could then rework the sentence "Beric Cohmwell..." so include the detail about the airship swaying, since we've established that there is a storm raging outside. Also, the sentence about the wind would then take us back to the storm (but now from the inside of the ship, since we've connected to Beric)

Admin 2016-1-15 9:40 AM

Comment [5]: At this point here I feel the flashback carries on too long and pulls us from the present mood you've set up. Either consider cutting this flashback and returning to present, or considering anchoring us in the present with some details to remind us of Beric in the airship with the storm raging outside.

(NOTE: I'll still edit this section though in case you use it elsewhere / find a way to rework so that the flashback lingers with evolving / developing present)

Admin 2016-1-15 9:40 AM

Comment [6]: I'm of a mind to cut the flashback as suggested because this passage in particular feels like too much. It's dipping now into backstory that I think is implied in the glimpse we've already got of Beric's relationship with his father.

You might consider copying this bit up to where present resumes into a special file and call it "backstory". It helps to take it out but not delete altogether. Then you might find other places in the manuscript where this belongs. A character's backstory exists and lives all throughout the narrative, but the focus of the narrative always has to be on the evolving story and what's immediately relevant to it, so backstory presents itself at opportune times, but never becomes the story itself.

Admin 2016-1-15 9:40 AM

Comment [7]: A paragraph like this would be a great call-back to work in at a reflective moment later here in the opening as Beric is observing the storm – so in cutting this part I'd consider where you can use this and work it in.

Beric remembered the night his father had succumbed. The night the crown had fallen to him. A ferocious disease born from the festering of an untended wound. That was what had killed his father, in the end. William had led his people into war against the *Men'kai*, the great enemy of the *Commigial*.

Though costly, the clash of arms had ended in victory for their people, and a shattering defeat for the Men'kai. The Men'kai hordes had been smashed, and the survivors pushed back over the Illuvian River. At the time, the minor scrapes and cuts Beric's father had obtained in the fighting had appeared a small price-to-pay for his people's total-victory. That was until the first signs of infection had begun to appear. Poison, it turned out, had tinged the blade that had cut his father's skin. A poison no healer could cure once it took hold. But even in dying his father had been stronger than most. King William met his end with honor and dignity. Beric was called to his father's chamber, and there forced to endure the horrific stench of William's body as the sickness inside of him ate away his flesh. And yet when Beric looked upon his father's face there was no fear, no hesitation. The man lived up to the words he preached. From his bed, his father performed the final ceremony of the *Rite of Passage*, and his title passed to Beric. Only then, after his final task was complete, did William allow himself to pass.

"Don't leave it in a worse place than you found it, boy." Of all the things one might say to their only son before the end, that was what his father had told him. He might have told Beric that he loved him. But it wasn't in his father's nature to be kind, or compassionate. Duty was all that had ever mattered to that man.

Another rumble of the hull made Beric curse under his breath as he leaned forward to grip the railing. "How are we for time?" he asked. The room had been silent for too long, with only the terrible howling of the wind filling his ears.

"On schedule, your grace," the Ula's *First-Navigator* reported. "Storm is slowly relenting, and we should arrive at our destination shortly. Within the hour, I suspect, if the Mother is with us."

"And the skies are still empty?" Beric asked.

"The storm makes it difficult to see, but there are no lights or unidentified signatures. Everything appears green, sire," another crew-member answered him.

Admin 2016-1-15 9:40 AM

Comment [8]: Careful of this font – I'm not sure if it's intentional, but in submission you'll want standard size font – Time New Roman 12 point, double space, 1" margins.

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Comment [9]: This paragraph here is definitely backstory. Perhaps in chapter 3 once we've rooted ourselves more in Beric you can dip into a reflective passage, but for an opening, especially when we've paused from the action / tense mood created in the opening paragraph, this here further stops the tape and disconnects readers.

Admin 2016-1-15 9:40 AM

Comment [10]: I flagged the paragraph above the behemoth one just above – I'll flag this too. I think this could go after that other short one (2 paragraphs up) if you find a spot to call back to those memory.

Admin 2016-1-15 9:40 AM

Comment [11]: Here the story resumes. Consider cutting out that flashback where I mentioned, or else reworking that sequence so that the flashback augments the established present setting / situation.

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From one corner of the bridge, Seneschal Balfour Pentaglass growled loudly. The old man sat at one of the empty stations with his arms and legs crossed. He was dressed in mail and armor, and in addition to his side arm he had a massive clay-more strapped to his back. He was older than Beric by nearly ten years, with gray streaks running through his long hair as well as his thick beard, but his body was that of a man twenty years younger.

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Comment [12]: Because this is not the same speaker as above, putting in the same paragraph creates ambiguity, i.e. is this the same person who just spoke?

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"This is foolish," the seneschal said. "Your father would have agreed with me." It was not the first time he had given voice to his considerable discontent. Balfour had always been his father's man. The friendship between the seneschal and Beric's father went back decades, to back when Balfour had first been chosen to take up the mantle of seneschal. House-Guardian of clan Cohmwell.

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Moved down [1]: It was not the first time he had given voice to his considerable discontent.

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Moved (insertion) [1]

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Comment [13]: Moving this here so that it doesn't interrupt the flow of the dialog

"My father has been dead for some time," Beric told him. "It doesn't really matter what he might have done or what he might have thought. I am king. This decision is mine."

Balfour met his gaze from across the room. "They are not our allies. They never will be. William understood that."

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Comment [14]: What might help is if you liked the detail about him voicing discontent to his relationship / Beric's memory of his friendship with his father, i.e. ...given voice to his considerable discontent. Balfour had always been his father's man, and made no small point of reminding Beric that the friendship, like the crown, was not inherited. The friendship between...

"And they don't have to be," Beric countered. "But so long as they are willing to live in peace, we need not kill each other." The thought of fighting this battle once more made him equal parts furious and tired. Beric was weary of arguing with the seneschal. He was tired of fighting everyone. He had spent the weeks and months leading up to this moment in a bitter war of words with the lords of his lands. Most were of a mind with Balfour, but only Balfour himself was ignorant or disdainful enough of Beric's rule to voice his feelings so contentiously.

"Your father gave his life to defeat the Men'kai. He died driving them from the gates of our lands. And yet here you are, seeking peace with them. Do you truly believe that the Men'kai will honor any deal you strike? The savages will lie through their teeth to keep our armies from their borders, but the moment they have the strength, they'll come back to destroy us. And your father isn't here to defend Nin this time." As he spoke, Balfour's voice grew louder, fiercer, and he rose from his seat. This was a new stage of their clashing. He had never before spoken to his Beric in such a disrespectful way.

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Comment [15]: This sounds odd, like it's missing a word, might be better just as "to Beric"

Other heads in the room turned to watch the scene unfold. None spoke. They just stared in silence.

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Beric wondered whose wrath they feared more—their king's, or the seneschal's? Balfour, in addition to holding

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the honorific title of *seneschal*, was also *Protectorate of the West*. He was the Lord of Glasgen, those lands that lay on the doorstep of the *Blasted-Earth*, where the Men'kai dwelt. It was Balfour's people who had suffered the most during the Men'kai's incursions. He had even lost a son. It did not excuse his insolence, but the loss made Beric at least understand where the rage inside of the other man originated.

"They have not struck us once since the *Battle of the Blackwoods*," Beric told Balfour. "The Men'kai do not wish for war any longer. They are tired, just like us."

"They are only biding their time," Balfour said. "Waiting for us to lower our guard. Were your father still here, he would have led our armies into the *Blasted-Earth* years ago and finally put those damned animals to the sword. Every last one of them!"

"A good thing then, that I am here and he is not," Beric said. "We are Commigial, not monsters. We do not mercilessly butcher innocent women and children."

"There are no innocents among the Men'kai," Balfour replied. "They are killers, every single one of them. You will learn that, to your great misfortune."

"Then why do they beg us for peace? It was the Men'kai who sought us out. It was their chieftain; it was *Ju'kall* who sued for this meeting. He has given me his word that this will be the end of it. Do you understand that? An end Balfour, we could finally have an end. *We could have peace*. A chance for our children to grow up without the threat of war lingering over their heads." Beric regretted his last choice of words almost instantly. The seneschal recoiled as if he'd just been struck.

"Your children, not mine," Balfour hissed. Without another word he turned and stormed from the bridge. The other crew-members quickly returned to their duties as the seneschal's words hung over the deck.

"You should have had him restrained and thrown in the brig for that outburst," the First-Navigator *said*, scowling. "He had no right to question you in such a manner."

"He isn't alone," Beric sighed, "there were plenty more who thought just as he did. He lost a child. I don't think it's fair to expect him to understand why I'm doing this." A part of Beric wondered whether it had been a mistake bringing the man on this journey. As seneschal, it was Balfour's honor-bound task to shadow the king at all times. To help guide the realm and offer wisdom and council whenever it was needed or asked. However it was only burning conflict and cold bitterness that Balfour offered Beric as of late.

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Comment [16]: I find the hyphenation odd – consider just *Blasted Earth*.

Also, think about use of italics. Here I think just *Blasted Earth* is fitting since it's a place. Italics for formal offices or dialect words are okay.

Admin 2016-1-15 9:40 AM

Comment [17]: By the way, this brief flashback here is fitting because it's directly related to the scene you've built. I just want to point this out to contrast the note I've made about the flashback in the opening and how it doesn't fit in (at the full length, as indicated there).

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Comment [18]: It might help to see a bit of Beric's thoughts/feelings here given the tension of the moment he's assessing, i.e.

Beric took a breath and did his best to keep the frustration from his voice. "They have not struck..."

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Comment [19]: Again, consider non-hyphen – I won't mark any more. You can use find/replace to convert if you choose to

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"A Men'kai vessel is in sight now," the First-Navigator suddenly reported.

Beric turned to look out the forward cockpit. Ahead of them, some distance, deeper into the storm, the shape of another aircraft could just been seen through the haze. It was a smaller vessel than theirs, a transport designed for long-distance travel. The insignia it bore along its hull was unmistakable. A pair of spears crossing one another, and a serpent coiled around each shaft with venom dripping from their fangs. It was the symbol of Chieftain Ju'kall Des'tra.

A single light flashed from the airship's deck; once, twice... three times. "They're signaling us to approach," the First-Navigator stated. "Awaiting your instructions, your grace."

Beric took a deep breath as he watched the Men'kai vessel hover on the horizon. He wondered if he really was doing the right thing for his people. The Men'kai were *the Great Enemy, the Nightmare, and the Savage Horde*. Beric wondered what names they used for his own people. He wondered if the men on the other ship asked themselves the same questions he did. Could there really be peace between them?

"Bring us in," Beric finally commanded. "It is time to end this." It was time for a new beginning.

"Aye," the First-Navigator said before the ship rumbled as its manna-fueled engines hummed to life. A moment later, they were fast approaching the Men'kai transport. A signaling-light was carried to the forward window, and one of Beric's men sent back a message relaying their trajectory. The Men'kai ship remained dark for several moments before a reply came. *Welcome*, they signaled back. It was enough to sooth Beric's nerves some.

"Give me open communications with all decks. I have a message for our crew," Beric said. It was something that needed to be said and understood by everyone. He thought of Balfour then, and he hoped what he was about to say reached him as well.

"The channel is open, your grace. You may begin whenever you're ready," the First-Navigator said. Beric gave him a nod before he moved to the far wall's panel to retrieve the microphone.

"Attention all hands, this is your king." Beric stopped to survey the men he shared the bridge with. He took a deep breath. "Across the void lies the Men'kai ship. We will be docking with them momentarily. I understand that not everyone shares in my ideals about peace, about ending the long-standing hatred our two kinds have shared with one another since before anyone on this aircraft or theirs was even born. I promise you

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Comment [20]: Might help to say the Men'kai Chieftain – thus verifying this is one of their ships as the first navigator claimed

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Comment [21]: Same with this as with Broken-Earth. First Navigator is appropriate, I think using a hyphen for something that doesn't normally need a hyphen will read as strange

Admin 2016-1-15 9:40 AM

Comment [22]: Better to specify: the Men'kai

Admin 2016-1-15 9:40 AM

Comment [23]: Right here, where Beric is about to make his decision. THIS is a great place to put those two paragraphs I highlighted on the opening page in. His father's doubt and command for him not to leave the kingdom in worst shape than it was in. Here is a place for Beric to call back to the ghost that haunts him, fear of failure, but most importantly, of being too weak and unable to live up to what his father expected. Here is where a flashback (not too long – brief, the substance of those two paragraphs) would be perfect.

Then resume with his choice, knowledge that he has the make a choice.

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Comment [24]: What is "it"? Important not to hide thoughts from your readers. Rephrasing will avoid the feeling that Beric is holding back his thoughts, i.e. He had something to say, something that needed to be said...

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Comment [25]: This edit reflect the same point as in the prev. comment.

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